

Newton Highlands Congregational Church (NHCC) Summer Worship: The Morning Meditation July 16, 2023

“Systemic Bias and Woke Christianity” © Randall P Ellis

Although I have long had an interest in racism and bias, my deeper understanding started when I read the book [So you want to talk about race](#) by Ijeoma Oluo in 2018. Her book written for an audience of both whites and people of color, examined the causes and impacts of racism on people of color. It documents the many occurrences of extreme and obvious full-blown prejudice and acts of racism that frequently make it into the daily news and newspapers. But of particular interest to me was that she also highlighted the cumulative effect of many smaller actions in suppressing and depressing minorities called microaggressions. Not only overt racism but also microaggressions collectively cause psychological harm, causing health, anxiety, and depression. The minor offenses by people of privilege she describes – constant suspicions, disapproving looks, insensitive questions, and inquiries about hair or background – occurring individually may be insignificant, but collectively their repetition by the offending party, typically a white male person of privilege like me, has a cumulative effect. I found captivating her characterization of microaggressions as equivalent to daily suffering from a series of repetitive, random shoulder punches, which wears person out. The realization that a long series of smaller disadvantages can have as much impact as more overt encounters of racism or violence is profound.

While Oluo’s book emphasized the role that microaggressions play in maintaining racism and sexism, she does not introduce or highlight the concept of systemic bias. That became the focus of many subsequent books. Ibram Kendi’s “How to be an Antiracist” really highlights the roles of government and institutional policies, and “Caste” by Isabel Wilkerson highlights the commonalities of US discrimination against African Americans under slavery and Jim Crow, the Nazi treatment of Jews and homosexuals in Germany’s World War II, and the Indian system of castes. [The Color of Law](#) by Richard Rothstein nicely pinpoints the responsibility of many government actions fostering racism, sexism and other biases in systemic ways. The [1619 Project’s](#) 624 page anthology provides another comprehensive overview of all three types of racism: blatant acts, microaggressions, and systemic racism.

So how exactly are biases maintained systemically? Like the parables used in the New Testament, it is easier to understand systemic bias through examples.

An excellent study was commissioned by the City of Boston to try to understand why there were so few black, Latino, or female American-owned businesses winning contracts from the City of Boston. A 2021 study of five years of government contracts by the City of Boston valued at over \$2.2 billion. They found that only 0.4% of city contracts were awarded to black American-owned businesses, despite the study’s assessment that 6.8 % of businesses available to bid were black-owned, and blacks represented 23.5 percent of the city’s population.¹ Women-owned

¹ <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2021/02/05/black-owned-businesses-have-been-largely-shut-out-of-boston-contracts-city-study-shows>;

businesses did slightly better, with upwards of 8.5% of all contracts, while Hispanic, non-black American-owned, and native American owned businesses were also severely underrepresented with less than 1 percent of contracts won.

Lots of studies document inequities; this one also did surveys to explain WHY. The analysis identified three contributing factors, all barriers to contracting, not ability or worthiness. First, prior successful contracts with the city was a factor in having new bids accepted; Second, bidders had to submit extensive paperwork to prequalify; And third, firms had to make a deposit of 5% of the bid amount on meaningful contracts. That means that to have a shot at winning a bid on a \$1 million contract they would have to invest \$50,000 simply to enter a bid. Hence lack of prior successes, bureaucratic hassles, and sizeable pre-entry investments were effective barriers to racial equity in this market. This is systemic bias at its worst. Woke political leaders, including Michelle Wu, are trying to improve this, but it is not easy changing the rules.²

Another example of systemic bias relates to college admissions and affirmative action. The Supreme Court just ruled that universities can no longer use race as a consideration in admitting college students. In doing so, the court is essentially denying that there is a remaining race problem to be fixed in the US. I agree that the issue is controversial and there are some negative effects of affirmative action on beliefs about the capabilities of minorities favored by its policies. But eliminating all use of race in admissions seems too strong.

As one example, let's review how admissions at Harvard are currently made. Harvard currently admits about 20 percent of its entering freshmen who are alumni children. An additional 10 percent of admissions are for families making large donations to Harvard, plus about 20 percent get athletic scholarships, who are predominantly white, privileged students coming out of strong suburban schools. Given that all three favored groups benefit from the privilege of their parents, and are largely wealthy and not people of color, nearly half of all Harvard freshman admitted currently come from privileged backgrounds even before one begins to consider other factors for admission, like access to the best schools, libraries, travel, and summer activities. Giving preference to people who are first generation college attendees, or coming from lower income can change the admissions somewhat but may not fully rectify the effects of past inequity. The evidence from states that have added or dropped affirmative action from admissions is mixed. And the ruling may impact much more than just colleges and universities.

My own funded research is looking at systemic bias in academic economics departments. A group of us are studying how PhD students are recruited, selected, and mentored, and subsequently their placement, hiring, and promotion of economists at the top 100 research universities that train over 40 percent of all future professors. For economics departments like Harvard, MIT and BU, about 40 percent of PhD students are and have been women for the past 20 years, yet only 15 to 23 percent of the faculty are. The proportions of women, African American, and other underrepresented groups at these universities are low, and changing only very slowly. The number of female full professors at such departments is growing particularly

² <https://www.boston.gov/government/cabinets/economic-opportunity-and-inclusion/disparity-study-tool-towards-equitable-procurement>, downloaded 2/16/2023.

slowly. There were same number of female tenured full professors at BU when I arrived in 1981 as there are today. At current rates of improvement, it will take 100 years before parity of representation of women and underserved minorities is achieved. Why is this true?

In my academic and empirical work, I am trying to develop models that try to understand **homophily**, a natural property of human preferences which is that people tend to like to collaborate and socialize with people like themselves more than with people who are different. The belief that homophily is good is an important underpinning of systemic bias. There are many reasons for homophily, but one is because they believe that people of their time are more productive and more fun. It is this belief, not the fact that people prefer spending time with their own type, that is the problem. What is needed are changes in those beliefs and changes in who we network with. One way to do this is to show that some of our beliefs are wrong: it may actually be equally or even more productive to collaborate with people from different backgrounds. It could even be more fun. Changing these beliefs, and even making people appreciate the magnitude of their own biases against other races, genders, nationalities, and others will not be easy, but it may not happen unless we try. Some people may even discover the benefits in productivity and happiness from these new beliefs.

So far, this has been an academic sermon, discussing ideas that many economists can also relate to, but sparing the mathematics, the statistics, and the analytical models that I would use at a college seminar. What is the connection to being a Woke Christian? My preparation for this service helped me achieve a better understanding of the answer to that question. A very well known, progressive economist Sam Bowles from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst wrote an inspiring book called

[**The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens**](#), The usual economist and political scientist framework for policymaking is that “Policies affect outcomes.” This means that if you want to affect some outcome, then you should find the policy that achieves it. A slightly more elaborate version of this is that “policies affect decisions, that affect outcomes”.

The modern view of economists is that the world is more complicated than this. A better model is

Policies affect beliefs which affect decisions that affect outcomes.

Repeat

Policies affect beliefs which affect decisions that affect outcomes.

If I had a blackboard or PowerPoint, I would put this up on a board using arrows:

Policies change beliefs that change decisions that change outcomes.

Both microaggressions and systemic biases can make changing beliefs difficult because they reinforce people own beliefs about minorities, both by the minority members themselves and by the dominant majority.

The aha! moment is the realization that Religion also changes beliefs.

Religion changes beliefs that affect decisions that change outcomes.

This means that

Policies plus religion define beliefs that affect decisions that change outcomes.

The direct implications for religion are profound since religion also changes beliefs. Religion can both help us choose our leaders and help us support policies that reinforce socially desirable outcomes.

Unfortunately, not all Christians support beliefs that care about the social justice that I believe in: Too many Christians are still looking at the biased teachings of the Old Testament, which can be used to support racism, sexism, slavery, misogyny, and more. We need more socially minded Christians, following the precepts of the UCC church, which is Open and Affirming, and God is still Speaking faith.

In closing, I am very proud of how the UCC, and this church specifically, has a history of leading by making progressive, socially minded decisions. Since some of you are just visiting, let me highlight that:

In 1783, Massachusetts, with leadership by its many Congregational churches, was the first state to ban slavery.

In 1839, New England UCC churches led the legal defense of the Amistad slave ship passengers which was the first successful slave revolt that freed Africans and helped them return home.

In the 1970s NHCC had already called a husband-and-wife ministry team as our joint senior pastors.

In the 1990s NHCC was the among the first church in the state to become open and affirming congregation, welcoming gay and affirming members, and calling a lesbian associate pastor soon thereafter.

Twice in the 2000s, NHCC voted to broaden the set of LGBTQ+ folks welcomed into our congregation.

Perhaps during the 2020's NHCC will take an even more active stance in identifying, educating, and acting to reduce systemic biases that linger among us.

Amen.

July 16, 2023, Newton Highlands Congregational Church, Newton MA. Summer worship service. Available as presented at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjemWkkmmUg>